Kiss and don't say goodbye

—"Instead of stressed, I lie here charmed

'Cause there's nothing else to do, Every me and every you."

Placebo - Every You Every Me

The days when he had held his breath under the relentless gaze of the cameras finally came to an end when the studio doors closed for the holidays.

The stifling April heat in Bangkok felt like a welcoming embrace as Est left the company, with no heavy luggage, no expectations, and no desire for anyone else to look at him—except for the boy waiting for him behind the crowded bookshelf.

As he wandered through the bustling streets of Bangkok, Est watched the city transform. The immaculate commercial decorations from the corporate pre-Songkran celebration had disappeared, replaced by the vibrant, chaotic, and deeply authentic energy of a people preparing to leave the past behind. The stifling April heat no longer felt oppressive; now it felt real.

Vendors lined the sidewalks with colorful water guns and festive garlands. Children ran through the streets with buckets, already beginning the playful water fights that would define the next few days. Families gathered on stoops and balconies, stringing up traditional decorations and preparing food.

It felt like a new beginning.

When he arrived at the small apartment and opened the door, the chaotic noise of the capital faded away completely, leaving only the familiar, rhythmic hum of the old electric fan, which vibrated gently in the background.

"You're really here." William whispered, his voice hoarse and tinged with that devastating sincerity that always took Est's breath away.

William was the perfect antidote. When the noise became unbearable, Est suddenly found himself at William's door.

As soon as he stepped inside, the scent enveloped him—clean laundry, warm skin, and the faint ghost of darkroom chemicals—acting as a trigger that told his brain to disconnect from the world and focus solely on the physical—on what was right in front of him: William.

Est said nothing. He simply raised his hand, grabbed William by the back of the neck, and pulled him toward him to kiss him. Slowly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, they leaned back together, lying down gently on the student's

rumpled mattress, just as they had done days before.

Curled up against each other, the rest of the world faded away until their universe was reduced to that small room bathed in sunlight.

The kiss they shared then was deep and slow. William let out a silent sigh against Est's lips, running his fingers through the back of his tousled hair, holding him as if he never intended to let him disappear from his sheets again.

"Hong asked me something in the car the other day," Est confessed in a low voice, lowering his tone until it became a sleepy, intimate murmur, meant only for William's ears.

They were lying on their sides now, facing each other, their intertwined fingers resting on the pillow between them, that firm grip that had asked him if he was okay when everything else seemed superficial.

"He asked me if I was going to say anything publicly," Est continued, his dark eyes searching William's. "But he also asked me if I was going to take time off."

William's grip tightened around Est's fingers, a fierce kind of tenderness expanding between them in the quiet of the room. He listened intently, his thumb gently stroking the back of Est's hand.

"And what did you tell him?" William asked softly, his dark brown eyes searching Est's face with absolute devotion.

Est let out a breath that felt like a quiet release, shifting closer until his forehead rested against William's. Their noses were nearly touching, breathing the same air in the stillness of the afternoon.

"I told him I wanted a real break this year," Est said softly. "A holiday where I could actually breathe. And looking at you right now... I know I finally found it."

William rested his chin on Est's shoulder; his warm breath brushed against his skin while the old electric fan hummed in the background. He whispered softly, "You're overthinking things again. I can tell."

"Am I?" Est asked, though they both knew it was true.

"You get this little crease right here," William said, reaching up to trace the space between Est's eyebrows with his thumb. "When you're worried about something. Like you're trying to solve a problem that doesn't have a solution yet."

Est closed his eyes at the touch. "I'm worried about everything," he admitted. "Worried about what happens when we go back. Worried about protecting you. Worried that this—" he gestured vaguely at the space between them, "—won't survive in the real world."

When Est tried to change the subject, William kissed the side of his neck: a slow, intense, and reassuring touch that silently conveyed absolute acceptance.

"I'm clumsy with my words," William said, his lips still close to Est's skin. "But I've loved you since the moment I saw you in the dark. No matter when, where, or in what way I met you, I'm sure I would have fallen for you. That's not something that changes when we walk out that door, Est. That's not something that changes ever."

The words settled over Est like a warm blanket, chasing away the final, lingering shadows of his past insecurities. Moving instinctively, his fingers slid beneath the loose, fallen collar of William's shirt, his palm resting flat against the bare skin of his shoulder blade to trace the dark, intricate lines of the Skeleton Flower tattoo—realizing with a quiet shock that it had finally healed.

"It's completely healed," Est whispered, running his fingers over the smooth, set ink.

"Like you," William said softly. "Healing. Getting stronger. Beautiful because of what you've survived, not despite it."

Est didn't respond with words. He simply pulled William closer, their embrace tightening as the afternoon light continued its slow descent across the room. Entwined together in the warm, golden light of the room, their breathing synchronized, and they drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When Est finally blinked his eyes open, the bright afternoon glare had softened into a rich, heavy gold that poured over the edge of the mattress like liquid honey. The world outside the window had shifted; the sun was lower, softer, painting everything in amber tones.

William was already awake.

He was resting on one elbow, his dark brown eyes tracing the soft curve of Est's jaw with a focus more intense than any camera lens. There was something almost reverent about the way he looked at Est—like he was trying to commit every detail to memory, every eyelash, every freckle, every breath.

"How long have you been watching me?" Est asked softly, his voice still thick with sleep.

"Not long enough," William replied without hesitation. His hand came up to brush a strand of hair from Est's forehead. Est reached up, his fingers finding William's face, tracing the line of his jaw with the same reverence William had shown him.

"I've never felt this comfortable in someone else's space before," Est confessed quietly. "I always felt like I had to perform, even when I was alone. But here... with you... I don't have to be anything but myself."

William leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to Est's forehead.

"You're always enough, Est. Just as you are."

Est's eyes burned with unshed tears, but they were good tears—the kind that came from finally being understood.

"I'm not ready to tell the whole world yet," Est confessed, his voice barely audible. "But I'm ready to tell the people who matter."

William's smile was gentle, understanding. "That's more than enough. You're enough."

"I want you to come with me," Est said suddenly. "To meet my aunt. Aunt Malee. She asked me once if I was happy, and it was the only time anyone in my family ever asked. I want her to know why I can finally answer yes."

William's breath caught. "I'd be honored."

That night, Est did not leave the shelter William had offered him.

As the hours slipped into the deep silence of the Bangkok night, he lay awake; his mind was no longer consumed by the anxieties of the past, but was instead filled with a beautiful surge of new ideas: simple, peaceful plans for meals at street stalls, strolls through hidden corners, and a life devoted entirely to the two of them.

William held him close the whole time; was a constant anchor that proved Est's vulnerabilities were completely safe there.

They talked in the darkness, their voices low and intimate.

"What are you thinking about?" William murmured into the darkness.

"Everything," Est admitted. "And nothing. I'm just... happy. Is that allowed?"

William's chest rumbled with a soft laugh. "It's more than allowed. It's required."

They talked in hushed tones, sharing stories they hadn't told anyone else. William spoke about his childhood in the small town, about the isolation he felt before Tui dragged him out of the shadows. Est talked about his aunt, about the rare family member who had seen past the billboard to the boy underneath.

"Tell me about your aunt," William said, his fingers drawing lazy patterns on Est's back.

"She's small," Est said softly. "Sharp-minded. She raises orchids in her garden, and she tends to them the way most people tend to their children. When I was younger,

visiting her was the only time I felt like someone was actually seeing me, not just looking at me. She asked about my happiness, not my achievements."

"She sounds wonderful." William said.

"She'll love you," Est said with certainty. "Because she understands that love is about how someone makes you feel, not what they look like or what they do for a living."

William kissed the top of his head. "And how do I make you feel?"

Est was quiet for a moment, considering the question seriously.

"Like I'm finally allowed to breathe," he said finally. "Like home isn't a place—it's a person. Like I don't have to be perfect anymore, and that's the most freeing thing anyone has ever given me."

The next morning, the familiar hum of the old electric fan welcomed a bright, festive Songkran sun.

Together in the small kitchen, they shared a simple breakfast, the space filled with the domestic warmth of brewing coffee and quiet laughter. Est sat cross-legged in one of William's oversized cotton shirts, feeling completely at peace with his messy hair and bare face.

There were no stylists, no schedules, and no expectations.

"This is nice," William said, setting down a plate of scrambled eggs and toast between them. "Just us."

"I could get used to this," Est admitted, accepting a cup of coffee from William's hands. Their fingers brushed, and William held on for an extra second before letting go.

"You should," William said. "Because this is your life now, if you want it. Not something temporary. Not something borrowed. Something real and permanent and entirely yours."

Est took a sip of the coffee—perfectly made, exactly how he liked it—and smiled. William remembered. William always remembered.

By midday, they finally stepped out of the apartment, traveling hand-in-hand through the vibrant, water-splashed streets toward Lego's house for lunch. When the front door opened, Hong's sharp eyes instantly scanned their relaxed faces, a knowing, supportive smirk playing on his lips, while Lego offered a warm embrace.

"Well, well," Hong said, stepping aside to let them in. "Look who finally decided to

join the rest of us in reality."

"Finally," Lego said, pulling them both into his arms at the same time. "I was starting to think you two had disappeared forever."

"We almost did." William said softly.

"You look different," Lego said, pulling back to study William's face. "Lighter."

"I am," William said simply.

Sitting at the table surrounded by the only people who truly mattered, William's hand found Est's under the cloth, intertwining their fingers. Est didn't pull away; he just smiled into the warmth of the room. The table was laden with food—traditional Thai dishes alongside modern snacks, a perfect blend of old and new. Lego had clearly gone all out. Hong was telling a story about a disastrous photoshoot, his hands gesturing wildly, Nut laughing beside him. Tui was teasing Lego about his cooking, and Lego was playfully swatting at him with a dish towel.

The afternoon passed in laughter and easy conversation. Lego played music. Tui and Hong debated the best street food in Bangkok. And through it all, William's hand remained in Est's—a constant presence.

"I have something to tell you all," Est said suddenly, as they were clearing dishes from lunch.

Everyone froze. The group turned to look at him.

"I'm not going back to the modeling circuit full-time," Est said, his voice steady and clear. "I'm scaling back. I'm going to be selective about the work I take on. And I'm doing it because I finally understand that my worth isn't tied to how much I work or how many campaigns I complete. My worth is tied to who I am when the cameras aren't on."

Hong let out a low whistle. "Look at you, setting boundaries. Who are you and what have you done with the ice prince?"

"William happened," Est said simply, looking at the boy beside him. "And you all happened. You showed me what real life could look like."

Nut raised his glass. "To real life."

"To real life." they all echoed.

The night air was thick with the electric pulse of live T-pop bass, the scent of rain, and the wild, joyful chaos of Bangkok in full holiday spirit. The outdoor venue was a sprawling sea of neon lights and wet, laughing bodies, with water cannons

periodically blasting cool mist over the dancing crowd.

Standing near the edge of the stage with plastic cups in hand, Hong and Lego were already lost in the rhythm of the music, shouting the lyrics along with the band. Nut and Tui danced nearby, completely at ease in each other's presence.

Est felt a sudden, freezing splash of water hit his shoulders, soaking through his simple cotton shirt and leaving his hair damp and tousled.

Instinctively, he froze for a split second—the old, ingrained reflex of a billboard model worrying about his appearance under flashing lights. He remembered the corporate pre-Songkran party from just a few days ago: the pristine, hollow decorations, the influencers glued to their phones, and the exhausting expectation for him to look untouchable while feeling completely empty inside.

But as another wave of cool water sprayed over the crowd, Est looked around.

There were no managers whispering schedules in his ear, no lighting diffusers, and no superficial conversations. Est looked at the wet, smiling boy in front of him—the photographer who loved him in his darkest hours, in his rumpled bed, and now under a sky full of music and rain.

Standing here, soaked to the bone and completely uncurated, Est realized his self-esteem wasn't tied to applause anymore.

A genuine, radiant smile broke across Est's face.

Beneath the cover of the crowd, the pulsing bass, and the falling water, William reached down, his fingers slipping smoothly into Est's, intertwining them tight.

Est didn't check over his shoulder for cameras, and he didn't care who was looking. He just held on, completely safe in his own skin, celebrating his real new beginning.

The pulsing bass of the T-pop track continued its relentless rhythm as the night deepened, but a sharp flash flickered in the corner of Est's vision. In the chaotic haze of flashing neon, rain, and dancing bodies, someone in the crowd had lowered a smartphone—a bright screen displaying a crystal-clear, unedited photo of Est and William pulled close together, lips pressed against each other under the falling water.

A sudden, familiar coldness seized Est's chest. The ingrained instincts of a life lived under the relentless glare of the cameras returned instantly. Beside him, William felt the shift in Est's posture and stiffened, his grip tightening around Est's hand as panic flickered in his brown eyes.

For a moment, they both stood frozen, watching the person retreat into the crowd.

Within minutes, the picture began quietly making its rounds on social media, the

initial ripples of online speculation beginning to stir. Est's phone buzzed with notifications. Then William's. Then both of them simultaneously.

The comments were already flowing in: "Is Est dating?" "Who?" "New relationship confirmed?"

Est's breath came shallow and fast. This was it. This was the moment he'd been dreading. The exposure. The loss of control. The—Just as the suffocating anxiety threatened to drag Est back into the dark, a notification pinged simultaneously on their phones.

Hong—the undisputed black sheep of their circle, whose chaotic energy was only matched by his fiercely protective loyalty—had struck.

Without warning anyone, Hong had uploaded a loud, vibrant, and utterly unapologetic photo of himself kissing Nut right in the middle of the crowd, accompanied by a teasing, chaotic caption that practically screamed: "Surprise! Bet you didn't see this coming. Happy Songkran from your favorite troublemakers."

Within seconds, the internet went into a complete frenzy.

The sudden, wild reveal of Hong and Nut's relationship swept through social media like wildfire, completely eclipsing the blurry photo of Est and William. The spotlight shifted entirely, swallowing up the rumors before they could even take root.

The comments pivoted immediately, the algorithm's attention span shifting to the more dramatic, more shocking, more interesting story. Within an hour, Est and William's photo had been buried beneath layers of Hong and Nut discourse.

Once again, Hong had saved the day in the most wildly unorthodox way possible.

Watching the comment section erupt over Hong and Nut while their own secret slipped safely back into the quiet shadows, Est let out a long, shaky breath that dissolved into a genuine laugh.

"Did he just—" William started.

"He did," Est confirmed, pulling his phone up to see the full extent of Hong's chaos. The caption had already generated thousands of comments, most of them shocked, supportive, or demanding more details. Perfect. All the attention was on Hong, who could handle it with the ease of someone who had spent his entire life against convention.

The stunt had bought them precious time—time to breathe, time to navigate their bond on their own terms, and time to keep what he had with William as private and protected as they wanted it to be.

Est looked across the crowd at Hong, who was currently grinning like a stray cat,

throwing a victorious peace sign their way while Nut laughed beside him, shaking his head in fond exasperation.

A profound, warm wave of gratitude washed over Est.

Meeting Hong had truly changed his life.

Before Hong dragged him out of his shell, Est's universe had been tiny, cold, and confined to empty studio sets and superficial expectations. Hong was the catalyst who had opened the door, introducing him to this chaotic, beautiful group of friends—and ultimately leading him straight to William.

Hong hadn't just expanded his world; he had given Est a real life to live inside it.

Later, as the festival began to wind down, the group gathered near the edge of the outdoor venue.

Est pulled Hong into a quiet, tight hug on the wet pavement, his face buried in Hong's shoulder.

"Thank you," Est whispered, the words inadequate but sincere.

Hong just waved a hand, already looking exhausted from his own revelation. "Don't thank me. Just go be happy with your photographer before the internet remembers you exist again."

"You're impossible." Est said, pulling back.

"I know," Hong replied, grinning.

Leaning his head against William's shoulder amidst the music and the rain, Est held William's hand tight beneath the festive lights, happier than he had ever been.

The chaotic roar of the festival eventually gave way to the soft, gentle blue of early dawn. Before they boarded the morning train out of the city to see Est's aunt, the small group gathered on the quiet curb outside Lego's complex. The streets of Bangkok were still asleep, bathed in a cool, misty haze.

"Take care of him," Nut said to William, placing a hand on his shoulder with the gravity of someone passing on a sacred duty. "But also let him take care of you."

"Always." William promised, and Nut nodded, satisfied.

"Go enjoy your real holiday," Hong said, his voice warm. "And don't worry about the internet. Nut and I are keeping them plenty busy."

"I will." Est promised.

The gentle rhythm of the train rocked them as the urban landscape gave way to open green fields. Sitting quietly against William's shoulder, Est pulled his phone from his pocket, the screen illuminating his face in the soft morning glare. Notifications were already flooding their group chat, buzzing with the cheerful, unscripted energy of people who truly cared for one another.

Est scrolled through the unread messages, a soft smile spreading across his lips.

The first photo was from Hong—a chaotic, candid shot of Nut sitting at Hong's small kitchen counter, wearing an oversized apron and looking exasperated while holding a spatula, with Hong grinning victoriously in the foreground over a plate of slightly burnt eggs.

HONG: "Nut says I'm banned from the kitchen. I say he's being dramatic."

NUT: "You set off the smoke alarm. Twice."

HONG: "Details."

Right below it, Lego had sent a quiet, serene picture from a nearby temple. He and Tui were standing side-by-side in simple linen clothes, holding traditional lotus flowers, their faces peaceful as they paid their respects for the New Year. No caption. Just an emoji of two hands coming together.

There were no staged poses, no corporate sponsors, and no superficial curated perfection. Just his friends, living genuinely, laughing, and sharing their lives without pretense.

Looking at the bright screen, a quiet realization settled deep within Est's chest.

When he had walked away from the studio doors and escaped into the stifling April heat, he had been searching for a way to breathe. He had been looking for William, yes, but as he stared at the photos of the boys, he realized he had found something equally life-changing: a true, unwavering circle of friends.

A safe haven where he wasn't a product or a billboard, but simply Est.

"What are you smiling at?" William asked softly, his voice a low, cozy rumble against Est's crown as he leaned down to look at the screen.

"Just the guys," Est murmured, his thumb gently resting over the photo of Lego and Tui before locking the phone and slipping it back into his pocket. He turned his face into the crook of William's neck, inhaling the familiar, grounding scent of clean laundry and warm skin. "I got everything I was looking for."

William's hand tightened around his, thumb stroking the back of Est's knuckles in a

slow, steady rhythm.

"No," William said softly. "You didn't find it. You built it. You chose every single person on that group chat. You chose to stay."

Est pulled back just enough to look at William's face—really look at it, without the camera lens between them, without the professional distance, without any armor at all.

"I love you," Est said, the words simple and complete.

"I love you too," William replied. "Not because you're beautiful or talented or successful. But because you're brave enough to ask for help. Because you notice things other people miss. Because you chose to come home."

Outside the train window, the golden morning sun bathed the countryside in warmth.

The train pulled into a small station, and Est led William down the platform toward a modest, flower-filled house that seemed to embody the exact opposite of the one he grew up in.

Standing on the porch was a small woman with kind eyes and flowers in her hair. Aunt Malee.

When she saw Est, her entire face transformed into a smile that contained years of love and understanding. When she saw William—and the way William held Est's hand, the way he looked at him like he held the entire universe—her smile deepened.

"So you finally found someone who makes you happy." Aunt Malee said, drawing them both into an embrace.

"I did," Est said, his voice thick with emotion. "I found all of them, actually. But William—William feels like coming home."

William squeezed his hand.

As they stepped into the house filled with orchids and genuine warmth. It wasn't about escaping the cameras or the pressure or the performance. It was about finally, after all these years of holding his breath, learning to breathe. And the most beautiful part was that he got to do it surrounded by people who loved him for exactly who he was—not the Prince, not the model, not the merchandise.

Just Est.